FEMICIDE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

BY

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Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas
During the last decade, countries in Latin America have experienced an epidemic of woman-killing. Bodies are everywhere: turning up in ditches on the side of the road, on the curbs of city streets, and in wooded ravines, often with signs of mutilation and rape.

The bodies have been found riddled with stab wounds and bite marks. Signs of rape have been detected, breasts mutilated, hair chopped off and faces disfigured.
DEFINITION OF FEMICIDE

Femicide
The killing of females because she is a female.

Feminists advocate for the term “femicide” because it removes the gender-neutral nature of homicide.

They believe that the term “homicide” demeans the woman’s experience and her relationship.

The term “femicide” indicates the true intent of the crime—killing a woman because of her gender.
DEFINITION OF FEMICIDE

It is:

• form of homicide which is gender based
• most serious and lethal form of violence against women
• sexist terrorism
• hate crime against women
• occurs in every sphere of life
**TYPOLOGY OF FEMICIDE**

*Intimate Femicide* - the killing of a woman by her partner. It is the most common form of femicide. This is the most common form.

*Intra-familial femicide* - committed by family members, such as honor killing, feticide, female Infanticide

*Multicidal femicide* - committed by serial murderers and mass murderers.

*Systematic Femicide* - during armed conflict when females are systematically slaughtered
As well as by gangs, organized crime syndicates,
TYPOLOGY OF FEMICIDE

KNOWN TO VICTIM
- INTIMATE FEMICIDE
  - CURRENT PARTNERS
  - FORMER PARTNERS
- INTER-FAMILIAL FEMICIDE
  - NON-INTIMATE FAMILY MEMBERS

NOT KNOWN TO VICTIM
- MULTICIDAL FEMICIDE
  - SERIAL MURDERERS
  - MASS MURDERERS
- SYSTEMATIC FEMICIDE
  - ARMED CONFLICT MURDERERS
  - ORGANIZED CRIMINALS
  - CRIMINAL GANGS

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LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

History of conflict and authoritarianism

Displaced Population
Nicaraguans displaced in Honduras and Costa Rica; Salvadorans in Costa Rica and Mexico; Guatemalans in Mexico and as refugees in the United States.

Poverty and inequality
population live on less than two US dollars a day.

Family breakdown
Many families are single-parent households. intra-family violence is common in Central America.
EXTENT OF FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Guatemala
Last decade, over 5,000 women have been murdered in Guatemala, with population of less than 15 million.

Average two women are killed each day.

One of the highest female mortality rates in the world. About 800 women were killed in 2009 and 685 were killed 2010 and 705 in 2011.

Labeled one of the most dangerous place for a woman in Latin America.
Honduras
A femicide occurs every 48 hours.

Between 2002 and July 2009, an estimated 1,230 femicides.

From 2003 to 2007, the killing of women grew four times faster than that of men.
EXTENT OF FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

*El Salvador*

El Salvador has one of the world’s highest “femicide.”

In 2010, a woman was murdered every 13 hours.

In 2010, 477 women murdered with 193 of those murders occurring in the capital city alone.

640 femicides in 2011.
EXTENT OF FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Nicaragua
There is serious under-recording.

Lack of indicators to classify crimes and thus differentiate between homicides in which women are victims and genuine femicide.

A research study by the Network of Women against Violence, identified 269 cases between 2000 and the first half of 2006.
Chart 1: Femicide in Four Countries in Central America 2002-2009

Source: Carbera, P. M. (2010). Intersecting Violences
Nature of the Femicides

Murders
• majority by firearms
• Physical assault
• Steel weapon
• Knives
• Strangulation
• often carried out with shocking brutality (such as dismembered bodies)

Location found
• Home
• Streets
• Wooded areas
MOTIVATION FOR THE FEMICIDES

Domestic Violence
20 and 30 percent of murdered women in Mexico and Central America are killed by their partners or relatives.

Organized Crime circuits
Human trafficking, most often victimizing women.

Gangs
MS 13 and the 18 heavily exert control over women in marginalized urban communities.
Killing a woman is also part of some gangs’ initiation processes.
MOTIVATION FOR THE FEMICIDES

Acts of vengeance
Loan sharks will target a debtor’’s wife. It has become more common to seek violence against wives and daughters.

Misogynist Cleansing
Extreme level of violence against its victims, including mutilation, degrading words defacing the corpse, and evidence of sexual and/or other forms of torture.
RISK FACTORS FOR FEMICIDES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

**Age**
Trends show that victims are overwhelmingly young. The average age of femicide victims is between 15 and 25.

**Poverty**
Many of the victims are poor. Most jobs for women in Latin America are low-paying.

**Marginalization**
Many of the murdered women are from the most marginalized sectors of society.

Many are often constrained by traditional attitudes that subordinate them within the family and limit their mobility.
RISK FACTORS FOR FEMICIDES IN LATIN AMERICA

*Migrant status*
These women factory (maquila) often work overtime, which often means walking long distances at night, even if they are scared to do so.

Young women who leave rural homes (where they may already have experienced violence) for a job in the city are often exposed to violence.

*Informal and Unprotected Forms of Labor*
Such as street vendors, domestic servants, prostitutes, and mules' transporting drugs inside their bodies, in which violence practically comes with these jobs.
EXPLANATIONS FOR FEMICIDES IN LATIN AMERICA

Feminist Arguments:

• unequal power relations between men and women.
• Mechanism of control and domination.
• Intersections between gender, sexuality, nationhood, race and economic exploitation.
• Discrimination and violence against women are interlinked.
• Form of deeply entrenched sexism.
EXPLANATIONS FOR FEMICIDES IN LATIN AMERICA

Socio-cultural Environment

*Machista* cultural attitudes are reinforced in newspapers, commercials, songs, and television which reproduce myths justifying violence against women.

A *continuum of violence*

Culmination of a continuum of violence in cultures violence against women are considered socially acceptable by both men and women.
EXPLANATIONS FOR FEMICIDES IN LATIN AMERICA

Legacy of the Civil Wars

Part of the violence can be attributed to the legacy of civil wars in the region.

In a gruesome show of power, some of the femicides are brutal, similar to what occurred during the civil war:

Victim are tortured, disfigured, and dismembered, abandoned them in ditches, trash cans, or garbage bags.
EXPLANATIONS FOR FEMICIDES IN LATIN AMERICA

Backlash against women
The increase in the number of femicides can also be linked to women's empowerment.

As a backlash against women who have stepped outside the 'safe' domestic sphere to earn an independent living

Femicide is the result of a violent clash between rising "feminismo" and ancient "machismo."
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Legal Response
El Salvador and Honduras have all passed laws making violence against women a crime, yet the laws are not enforced.

Legislation
In April 2008 the Guatemalan Congress approved a Law Against Femicide and other forms of violence against women.

Penalty of 20 to 50 years imprisonment without parole for femicide.
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Criminal Justice Response

In most Latin America, there are very few mechanisms to address gender-based violence in general.

Law enforcement officials often view these murders as spontaneous or accidental acts and do not take appropriate actions to investigate them.

They sometimes assume that women who are murdered are also either criminals or prostitutes.
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Criminal Justice Response
Dysfunctional judicial system with insensitive prosecutors and judges.

Consequently, most of the femicides are not investigated and when they are, very few perpetrators are brought to justice.

In Guatemala, 70 per cent of murders of women are not investigated and no arrests has been made in 97 per cent of cases that were investigated.
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Impunity

• Intimidation: threats buy easy access to "a weak criminal justice system”

• Corruption - murderers use bribes politicians and members of the criminal justice system.

• Lack of policy and mechanism to address gender-based violence.

• Climate of passivity and unwillingness from the authorities to investigate the crimes.
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Inadequate, insensitive, and prejudiced responses by service providers contribute to the patriarchal structure and facilitates the normalization of femicide.

• The sensationalist treatment of femicides by the press, newspapers, radio and television, devaluing the problem, making the victim invisible.

Lack of resources and proper training.

Systematic absence of punishment causes more femicides.
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

International Community
For a very long time, this crime was invisible to the international community.

Although in 2007 the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on the Central American governments, the EU institutions and EU Member State governments to take meaningful actions towards eradicating discrimination and violence against women, punishing killers and strengthening legal systems, little has been done since.

In 2007, Congress passed the measure known as H.RES.100. It is an effort by a large bipartisan group of representatives to try to end "femicide" in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central and South America.
RESPONSES TO FEMICIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

International Community
In recent years, human rights organizations such as:

- Amnesty International
- International Federation of Human Rights,
- Centre for Justice and International Law, and the
- UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women

have undertaken official missions, produced research reports, and supported women’s organizations’ struggle for justice.

Women politicians in Central America, in collaboration with women’s organizations, have spoken out at international Hearings on femicides in Latin America.
GENERAL SITUATION

The general devaluing of women in Latin America is inscribed in cultural and legal codes.

Lack of accountability for them somehow further validates the idea that women deserve the treatment they receive. Continued marginalization of women.

Within mainstream culture, media, politics and the legal system, femicide continues to be viewed primarily as a personal, individualized issue in Latin America.

Many of those involved such military officers, drug traffickers etc. , remain outside the law.
RECOMMENDATIONS

*Zero tolerance*

The government s should legislate that gender-based violence is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

States have yet to fulfill their obligation of due diligence in the prevention, investigation, legal prosecution, sanction and reparation of femicide.

Lack of political will.
Collection of data on violence against women

There is little data on femicides in Central America.

Necessary resources should be provided to implement a standard system for collecting data and compiling statistics on violence against women and girls for use by Law and Justice Sector agencies and other relevant bodies.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Training for Investigators

Police investigators, crime scene investigation officials and forensic experts should receive intensive and ongoing training in investigative techniques.

Such training should refer to international standards and expertise including on how to detect, document and investigate cases of gender-based violence.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The general devaluing of women in Guatemala, especially in rural areas, inscribed in cultural and legal codes.

In the long term, only real social and cultural change will end the long and terrible history of discrimination and violence against women and girls just because they are female.